



Photo by JO1 Mary Popejoy

From right to left, Hayden Street, regional environmental coordinator, holds a bag of oyster shells while Betsy Peabody, PSRF executive director and Capt. T.J. Dargan, chief of staff, Commander, Navy Region Northwest collect oysters at Fleet and Industrial Supply Center, Puget Sound's Manchester Fuel Department recently.

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By JO1 Mary Popejoy
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Navy personnel at Fleet and Industrial Supply Center, Puget Sound's Manchester Fuel Department, members of the Puget Sound Restoration Fund (PSRF) and the Puget Sound Action Team (PSAT) put on their rubber boots and gloves Oct. 27 and went searching for oyster beds in a portion of Little Clam Bay, which adjoins to Manchester Fuel Department. Little Clam Bay was chosen as the ideal place for oyster spawning because of its warm temperature, which would prove helpful as part of their efforts to enhance and restore oyster beds and provide an oyster spawning sanctuary for the Olympia oyster.

For thousands of years, Olympia oysters provided sustenance for Washington's tribes and habitat for a host of marine organisms in the Pacific Northwest. Even though it was popular, a low point in Olympia oyster production occurred soon after 1927 due to pollution, over-harvesting, logging, and consumption. By 1960, over harvesting has nearly exterminated native oyster beds in Willapa and Samish bays, and pollution had wiped out most of the south Puget Sound's once-thriving Olympia oyster populations. Olympia oysters have survived in the north and central Puget Sound, and populations in the south Sound and Hood Canal are gradually recovering.

"In the late 1990s the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife put together a plan to rebuild the Olympia oyster," said Betsy Peabody, PSRF executive director. "They presented it to the Washington State Fish and Wildlife Commission and they loved it. They approved it, but were unable to attain funding from the Legislature," she said.

She added that around that time PSRF heard about the plan, and thought it would be a great project to champion as part of the effort to rebuild the only native oyster population along the West coast.

Since then, the Navy PSRF and PSAT have worked together in the enhancement and restoration of oyster beds by providing an oyster spawning sanctuary at Little Clam Bay. They came together last week to collect oysters in Little Clam Bay and determine if any Olympia oysters had planted seed in that particular area.

"In order for us to produce seed for restoration, we have to have to find a natural population of Olympia oysters," said Peabody.

One of the ways they discovered the Olympia oyster in Little Clam Bay was by hanging bags containing oyster seeds from floats or log booms. When oysters spawn, their larvae sets on the shell, and then the shell can be moved to a restoration site to produce more seed.

While digging for oysters on the shoreline, Peabody reminded everyone that the genetic makeup of each oyster is not always the same.

"It's important that we work within the different sub basins for genetic reasons because it is possible there are slight genetic variations between Olympia oysters in the South, North and central basins, which

is why we're all airing on the side of caution so we don't mess with the genetic integrity of this oyster in our good intentioned effort to restore it," said Peabody.

Once the oysters were collected, Peabody told those in attendance that a portion of the oysters will be tested for disease so that they do not contaminate the hatchery.

Being able to be a part of such a great enhancement project was very rewarding for Capt. T.J. Dargan, chief of staff, Commander, Navy Region Northwest.

"I am really pleased to be here and support Betsy Peabody and Duane Fagergren in what they are doing. It's a success story and another manifestation of our partnership with local environmental groups to bring native species back. We're pleased to be able to use Navy property to support their initiative. It's a win, win for us," he said.

Peabody added that having such a great partnership with the Navy has made restoration a huge success.

"Having a partnership with the Navy has allowed us to produce thousands and thousands of seed for restoration sites in a variety of locations. Our partnership is making restoration happen," she said.

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Navy lends support to Olympia oyster enhancement efforts